

Pride comes before the fall

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Pride comes before the fall

by [Lost_in_thoughts](#)

Summary

Cedric, one of Brehen's kittens, is determined to make his mentor proud. Turns out, he will have to pay a steep price for it.

Notes

One day, while throwing headcanons at each other, as you do, I came up with an idea for Cedric's backstory. Akhuna said I should give it a go and here we are! Akhuna outdid herself once again as a beta-reader and I'm forever grateful for that!

I hope you enjoy the story. Kudos and comments are dearly appreciated, as always. Have a great day!

This fic will be updated on Sundays at 07:00 pm CET (UTC +2).

Chapter 1

Cedric shuddered, trying to ignore the rain whipping his face and the goosebumps that covered his body like a rash. He brushed his wet hair out of his eyes only for a gust of wind to blow it right back onto his brow. The winter storms had come early this year, and here, on the roof of a warehouse in Fano, there was no protection at all.

The weather was the reason Guxart had forbidden any tightrope lessons for today. Luckily, Brehen didn't care for their Grandmaster's orders. He had taken the adepts he mentored into town and promised those who would walk the tightrope without falling a dagger as a reward.

He wanted a dagger. Badly. Throwing knives were nothing special, most cat adepts had at least one, but daggers were hard to come by when you weren't already on the path. Wearing one would set him apart from the others; it would mark him as one of Brehen's favourites.

Five of their group had already failed to satisfy their mentor. Kensi and Tamwin hadn't even managed to climb up the warehouse; their fingers and feet slipping away in the wet stonework. Sure, they had barely passed their grasses, but Brehen always said that being a child was no excuse for bad performance. He had laughed about them and Cedric and the other four had chimed in. They would try harder next time, he guessed. Shame was always a good motivation.

Syrn and Naila, barely older than Cedric and one boy from his cohort, Amrian, had become frightened as they had seen how high Brehen had stretched the rope. True, the distance from the warehouse to the auction house would take a little while to walk and if you fell you could easily break your neck, but if they wanted to become real witches one day they would have to face much worse than a short walk on a tightrope. The rope for their final trial would sit higher than today, that much Cedric knew.

Their refusal had made Brehen angry, and that made him even more dangerous than he usually was. He had sneered at them and called them cowards, but they had still not set foot on the rope. Bad luck for them - Brehen had sent them down the warehouse to wait with the other 'lousy brats', and Cedric was sure extra chores wouldn't be their only punishments once they were back at the Caravan.

For him, the whole thing couldn't be going better. Now it was only him and Rhys, the oldest of their group. He didn't doubt Rhys would reach the auction house without difficulty, probably with a wide grin on his face. He was the best of Brehen's students – bold and witty and afraid of nothing.

Before Rhys took the blindfold from Brehen and put it over his eyes, he winked at Cedric.
"See you on the other side, Ced."

Rhys went over to the edge of the roof, rolled up his sleeves and raked his hands through his soaking-wet hair. After taking a deep breath, he went onto the rope. His first steps were light and steady, as if he walked on solid earth. Then, suddenly, the wind changed its direction, blowing the rain right into his face. He staggered, went two steps backwards and just as Cedric thought he would lose his balance and fall, he made a somersault and landed on the edge of the roof.

Cedric let out a sigh of relief, his heart beating as fast as when he had undergone the Grasses. Brehen, however, didn't seem relieved. Nor did he look disappointed. He was downright furious.

"What's that nonsense, Rhys? Are you a fucking circus dancer? You had to go to the auction house! A straight line from here to there! How stupid are you? Will you need someone to mark your way to a monster with glowing phosphor every time you go on a contract so you won't get lost?"

Rhys, taking off the blindfold, snorted. "Stop shouting. Walking a rope in that storm is madness!"

"You're a disgrace, you little bastard!"

"Fine, but at least I'm a living disgrace!" He raked his fingers through his hair once more, ignoring the insults Brehen fired at him. Instead, he looked at Cedric.

"C'mon, Ced. Let's get down. Tomorrow's another chance."

"Oh no!" Brehen bellowed from below. "Go down and join the other failures, but Cedric will stay."

"Ced?" Rhys' deep green eyes bore into his and for a moment, he pondered to go down with him. It was the first time Cedric witnessed Rhys deeming something too dangerous, so it probably was.

"Cedric, show me you're not one of these losers!"

Brehen's narrowed eyes were a safe sign that he was on the brink of a meltdown, and every storm was a fucking joke compared to his rage. Besides, if Cedric succeeded where Rhys had failed, he would have the chance to become Brehen's new favourite.

The tightrope didn't even sway a little, Brehen had fastened it tightly on both buildings. A look at the bushes in the distance that were bending from one side to another, or to the wooden signs at the shops that were almost overturning told him how grave the storm really was. He peeked over the edge of the roof. Even if he failed and fell, he could survive. He just had to roll over and take care of his neck. Or better yet, try a somersault. He had done this countless times, why should his skills fail him today?

Rhys may have stumbled, but that didn't mean it was impossible to walk that tightrope. He was nearly a head shorter than the older boy, so his centre of gravity was much lower. His

gaze wandered between Brehen and Rhys. Both looked back. It wouldn't take much longer and Brehen would start to shout at him. His mentor hated indecisiveness as much as cowardice.

He took a deep breath, brushing his wet hair from his brow once again. He didn't have to put on a spectacular performance, he simply had to walk a fucking tightrope. It wouldn't take him longer than two minutes at most. Three minutes and he would get his very own dagger.

Straightening his shoulders, he took the blindfold from Rhys and put it over his eyes.

"Ced, don't—"

"Shut up, Rhys!" Brehen's voice was dangerously low, like a predator growling at his prey.

"Ced."

He shook his head. "I'll make it, Rhys. You'll see."

After another deep breath, he stepped on the rope. The wind felt even more icy here, the rain cut like knives against his cheeks. It didn't matter. Two minutes and he would be free. He straightened, found his poise and walked. Balancing against the storm was difficult and dangerous, but after the first few steps, he got steadier, setting one foot before the other to the rhythm of his breathing. His heart was hammering against his chest, but he wasn't afraid. With every successful step, he felt better. Confident. Invincible.

About halfway, just when he stepped on a tiny bump in the rope, the wind was changing its direction again, blowing into his face with full force. He tripped backwards, lost his balance, tried to bend forwards and rowed desperately with his arms. Before he realized what was happening, he fell.

There was no time to roll over or make a somersault. There wasn't even time to scream before his head hit something hard.

Then, there was nothing.

Chapter 2

“We’re running low on meat and fish.” Guxart let his gaze wander over the others who were gathered around the table in his waggon.

“And on coal,” Ferenc, the blacksmith, added, taking a deep draw from his pipe.

“Easy,” Dragonfly mused. “We’ll send two groups hunting instead of one. That solves the meat problem and we can sell the furs on the market to buy new coal.”

“Very good.” He fixed his eyes on Jad who hadn’t contributed anything yet. “You will be responsible for assembling the hunting parties. It would be appropriate if Lexandre took part.”

Jad leant back in his chair and gave him a derisive smile. “It’s easier to talk sense into a rock troll than trying to get Lexandre to leave the warmth of the fire these days.”

“Bout time that lad pulls his weight,” Ferenc intervened. Dragonfly and Farid’eh nodded.

“Fear not, Grandmaster, I will fulfil the task to your satisfaction.”

“I am counting on it. Besides, I got a message from a group of Scoia’tael. A certain commander of the Rivian army is staying in a village nearby, obviously incognito. They asked us to send someone to take him out without much ado. As always, the payment will be appropriate. Do you have any suggestions?”

“What about-”

Before Farid’eh could make her proposal, the waggon door was pushed open, creaking in its hinges, only to reveal Kensi, one of Brehen’s youngest Kittens. She looked like she had just crawled out of a lake – her drenched clothes stuck to her skin, her dripping hair framing her face like a curtain. Still, she held her head high, her chin stretched forwards and a determined look in her eyes. If her mentor could have seen her, he would have been satisfied.

The others looked at Guxart, their faces showing different levels of annoyance at the interruption. Still, nobody said anything. They knew it was Guxart’s task to put the girl into her place, and they respected it. Even Jad, who only rolled his eyes at Kensi.

“Kensi, we’re in a meeting. You’re-”

“Cedric’s dead!”

All heads turned between Kensi and Guxart, but everyone kept silent. Everybody knew Brehen’s kittens were trouble and had a rather strange sense of humour. It was quite possible that her appearance was nothing but a macabre dare. Still, Guxart had to handle the situation with due severity.

“Explain.”

Kensi grimaced, crossing her arms in front of her chest. “This isn’t my fault! He fell off the rope during training and-”

“Where?”

“By the warehouse in town.”

Guxart ignored his urge to scream at the girl and shake her. It wasn’t her fault, after all. He took a deep breath.

“Dragonfly, you will take care of Kensi.”

“But-”

Dragonfly had reached the girl before she could go on complaining.

“Time to dry yourself and change your clothes. Then you will tell me what happened.”

Putting a hand on the girl’s shoulder, she led Kensi out of the waggon.

“I’ll prepare the sickbay,” Farid’eh said, putting her hand on Guxart’s back briefly before leaving as well.

Jad looked after her, smirking. “Dead boys don’t need a sickbay.”

“If he’s dead you and Brehen will build his pyre. Afterwards he and I will have a little chat.”

“I am sure he can explain what happened to your satisfaction.”

Guxart stood up and jerked his head to the door. “I hope so. For now, you’re dismissed, Jad. I have to get Cedric home.”

With a mocking bow, Jad left.

Guxart rubbed his hands over his eyes, got his cloak and gave Ferenc a small nod before he left.

“Watch out for the storm, Gux,” the blacksmith said, balancing his pipe in the corner of his mouth.

They always took care to set up camp only in places sheltered from the wind, so storms like today wouldn’t damage their waggons and belongings. Once he had left the forest and reached the main road, however, the storm hit him with full force. The rain beating down on him felt like pinpricks, and the gusts of wind came so suddenly and violently they made his horse shy several times.

He urged it on nonetheless. He couldn't take care of its sensitivities, he couldn't even take care of himself. He had to reach Fano as soon as possible. If he was lucky, Kensi had lied and this was all nothing but a bad joke. That would mean extra chores for all kittens involved for the next two months, but at least he wouldn't have to come back cradling Cedric's corpse against his chest.

Cedric. One of Brehen's child surprises, he was also one of his favourites: bold, brash and ruthless, but also enduring and apt. The boy had quickly recognized the dynamics in Dyn Marv and learned to act accordingly, always willing to please his mentor but smart enough not to cross Guxart openly.

Of course he wouldn't put it past him to go on a rope in this murderous weather. The boy was twelve years old and had survived the Trial of the Grasses just fine. Many Kittens tended to feel invincible afterwards. He couldn't blame him for it.

Brehen, on the other hand, was a different case. Guxart had forbidden rope training for exactly one reason – it was too dangerous. Not even a witcher of their school could best nature when it raged like today, and certainly not a mere aspirant. Brehen, of course, saw things differently. He thought that only the strongest Kittens deserved to be raised until they went to the path because what awaited them there was far worse than whatever could happen in the Caravan.

He had explained it as a simple cost-benefit calculation: Why feed incompetent adepts who wouldn't last one single day on the path? Only after Guxart had threatened to cut out his tongue if he ever said something like this again had he stopped, sneering and calling Guxart a coward.

Probably he wouldn't be too thrilled to hear that today was a simple cost-benefit calculation for Guxart as well: If Cedric was really dead, Brehen would have to pay for it, and dearly. A cut out tongue wouldn't be enough to make up for one human life.

Blinded by his rage, he slammed his heels so hard into his gelding's flanks that the animal reared up. His harsh treatment worked, though – he reached Fano after barely fifteen minutes.

Over the decades, he had come to know the city like the back of his hand. Crossing the main road, turning left, right and right again, he arrived at the warehouse that had already been training ground back when he had been a Kitten. A figure in a familiar dark blue jacket huddled against a brick building not far from there, so he spurred his horse into a canter and jumped down as soon as he reached the house.

The figure snapped his head back. It was Rhys, Brehen's oldest Kitten. The smell of pure, unfiltered fear and the desperate expression on his face made Guxart swallow.

"Help him!"

Guxart knelt down next to him, putting his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Calm down."

Rhys looked at him as if he was mad, a snide remark surely already halfway on his tongue. Guxart could see why: Cedric was lying unconsciously on the ground, his skin paler than

milk, a puddle of blood around his head, thinned by the rain. The bandage around his head was also already soaked through with blood.

At least, the boy was breathing. Where there was life, there was still hope, no matter how small or fleeting. Guxart hoped the saying would be right.

“Did you bandage him?”

Rhys gave a sarcastic laugh. “Who else? Brehen?”

“Good work.” Ignoring the remark, Guxart reached into his pocket and put a few coins into Rhys’ hands. “Search for an inn, get something to eat and warm up. I expect you back at the Caravan before nightfall.”

He unfastened his cloak and lifted Cedric with one hand, using the other to stabilize his neck. He couldn’t say if one of his vertebrae or his skull was broken, but he didn’t want to risk permanent paralysis. Carefully, he wrapped the boy into the thick fabric and pressed him against his body for additional warmth. Undercooling in combination with this head injury and the heavy loss of blood could be deadly even for a witcher.

“I got him. He’s safe now.”

This didn’t seem to convince Rhys, who was watching them with clenched teeth, brushing his wet hair from his face.

“I told him not to go! This fucking idiot!”

His voice sounded strangled as if he tried to bite back a sob. It was all too understandable – watching one of his comrades fall from a tightrope and his mentor leaving afterwards, trying to save Cedric’s life all on his own, waiting for help to come, and all this in the mid of a storm, not knowing if bandits or worse would try to take advantage of his situation – that was a lot to unpack for a young boy, no matter how close he was to leave for the path on his own.

“Did Brehen force you?”

Rhys shook his head, snorting. “Wish he did. Thing is, Ced went voluntarily because Brehen promised a dagger for the ones who succeeded.”

Guxart looked down at the boy in his arms. A dagger for his health, that was exactly the kind of deal Brehen loved. He wondered if there was a dagger at all or if there would have been another task after the tightrope, and then another, until even the last of his Kittens would have failed, giving him the chance to yell at every single one of them.

With a lot of self-control, Guxart bit down a remark about what he thought of Brehen, got up and mounted his horse, Cedric still pressed safely against him.

“Where is he?”

“What do you think? Took the others and went back to the Caravan.”

“It’s honourable you and Kensi stayed.”

Rhys snorted. “Not all of Brehen’s Kittens are psychopaths.”

“I never said you were.” With a last nod, he pulled sharply at the reins and galloped back home.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

In this chapter, Guxart takes care of Cedric and has to come to terms with his thoughts - and Brehen.

I hope you enjoy it and have a great Sunday! Thanks for all the clicks, kudos and comments so far :)

Most Cat witches avoided the sickbay whenever they could, and Guxart wasn't an exception. The waggon was a cruel reminder of their vulnerability, mutations or not. Yet, it was a vital part of the Caravan, just like the woman in charge – Farid'eh. No matter if you came to her with an infection, a fracture or any other kind of injury, if she couldn't find a treatment it was likely that there wasn't any.

Her expression when Guxart had laid Cedric down onto the prepared bunk had been ill-boding, so he spent the afternoon and evening worrying, his unease growing with every minute she didn't call for him.

Two hours after nightfall he took matters into his own hands. Farid'eh hated to be interrupted in her work and only an absolute idiot would risk to anger her, but even she needed to tend to her body's basic needs every now and then. With a plate of bread, cheese and roasted pork and a tankard of mead he entered the sickbay, wilfully ignoring the silence after he had knocked on the door.

The smell of thyme, willow bark, chamomile, leopard's bane and at least fifteen other herbs hung in the air like an intoxicating veil. Yet, the scent was a welcome distraction from the sight of Cedric,

his head freshly bandaged, his left arm in a splint, his chest barely moving. He looked like a corpse waiting for his funeral pyre to be set on fire.

Farid'eh raised an eyebrow as he put down the plate and the tankard on a table filled with tinctures and bandages.

"Don't look at me like this, Fae. You need to eat and drink. You've been here working for hours."

"That's what healers do." Stretching herself, she reached for the tankard and took a sip, giving Guxart a grateful nod. "I hope you haven't spent the whole time worrying."

His look was answer enough. "How is he?"

“Alive and stable. As for the rest – time will have to tell.”

“Is there a chance-”

“He could wake up as if nothing had happened, he could never wake up again, and everything in between could happen as well. Don’t torture yourself mulling over it.”

It was a try to ease his feelings of guilt, his self-reproach, and he was grateful for it. Still, he was the one in charge of Dyn Marv. It was his fault a young boy lay here and fought for his life because he had thought, against all his better knowledge, that a ban would stop Brehen from doing whatever he wanted. He had been naive. Stupid even. And a twelve-year-old boy had paid the price for it.

The sudden urge to grab the boy by his shoulders, shake him and yell at him why on earth he had stepped onto the rope made him clench his fists and dig his fingernails into his palms until the pain allowed him to think clearly again.

“Guxart?”

He took Farid’eh’s hand and squeezed it, looking into her eyes. “Thank you. Your work here is invaluable.”

“So is yours.” With a small smile, she brushed an unruly strand of hair behind his ear. “Go, Guxart. Do some Grandmaster things out there. I’ll take care of Cedric.”

“No. You will take a break and I will stay.”

She took another sip of mead, eyeing him over the rim of the tankard. “Half an hour.”

“Take as long as you need.”

Putting the tankard down, she went to Cedric and checked his bandage. After giving Guxart another long look, she left.

He sat down on the chair Farid’eh had put next to the bunk, eyeing the boy as if this could will him back into consciousness. Although it hadn’t been his fault, he felt responsible for Cedric’s fall from the rope. The most important abilities of a witcher of their school were agility, speed and precision. Tightrope lessons were essential to achieve these. Occasional fatalities came with it, if he liked it or not. He had done his part to make the training as safe as possible, but if he would do so much as try to suggest to replace the final trial on the rope for something else, some of the others would try to kill him in cold blood to choose a Grandmaster who suited their ideas and beliefs more.

And so, in letting everything stay as it was, in accepting some dead adepts along the way, he secured the lives of many more. He wanted to believe that this justified his decision.

Still, looking at Cedric hurt. He hoped the boy would survive his fall unharmed. Except for his head injury, his broken arm and some nasty bruises and scratches, he seemed fine on the outside - but who could say what damage his fall had done to his brain?

If he woke to be not quite right in the head, Guxart would have to act. He owed this to both the caravan and Cedric. For now, he didn't want to think about what that meant. The thing was, even if Cedric would recover completely, Guxart had to act nonetheless. Brehen would let the boy suffer for what had happened. He liked to make people miserable, and Cedric's accident would provide an all-too-welcome reason for him to do so.

Nursing the boy back to health just to let his mentor destroy him would be cruel, so Guxart had to find a solution. The easiest way out would be to assign Cedric a new mentor. As a Grandmaster, he had this power, and he didn't need to justify it before the others. Cedric's case was special, though.

Brehen had claimed the boy by the Law of Surprise. And only idiots would dare to challenge destiny. With a little luck, though, he would give Cedric up voluntarily.

That left the question if he could ban Brehen from mentoring any future kittens. If Cedric had stepped on the rope of his own free will, there was no ground for this decision. Everybody knew Brehen was cruel, ruthless and murderous, but alas, he was a damned good witcher, too. Guxart had yet to meet one of his kittens that didn't grow up to be an efficient witcher. And Rhys was right, not all of them turned out to be psychopaths themselves.

Suppressing a yawn, he rubbed his hand over his eyes. Luckily, that was a decision he didn't need to make today. At least he thought so until the door opened again. The smell of ginger wafted into his nose and he frowned.

“What do you want here?”

“Looking what the hell you and our beloved healer are doing in here.”

Brehen came closer, confident as ever, paying Cedric no attention at all. The cocky smile he gave made Guxart want to punch him. He clenched his fists and focused on his breathing. Farid'eh would get angry if he spilt blood in the sickbay.

“We're trying to fix what you have done.”

Brehen curled his upper lip, his face a mask of disgust. “I did nothing. I didn't force him on the rope and I definitely didn't throw him down!”

“I am well aware of this. Otherwise, I would have killed you already.”

“As if you had it in you! You can't even bring your noble self to bury that already dead brat over there!”

“It is touching you take time out of your day to explain my shortcomings to me. I worry there is something wrong with your eyes, though, because Cedric here is breathing just fine. So he deserves the same care as any other injured Cat.”

“Even if he survives, he will be nothing but a drooling idiot, good for nothing.” Brehen crossed his arms in front of him, narrowing his eyes.

Guxart clenched his fists harder, feeling his self-control dwindling down. One more stupid thing out of Brehen's mouth and it could snap like a thread that was strained too much. He took another deep breath.

"Isn't Cedric one of your favourites?"

"Ha! A trainee who is too stupid to walk a tightrope? He means nothing to me."

"And yet, you come here and want to see him dead. Wouldn't it be easier to just ignore him?"

"I'd love to. Thing is, winter is near. And right now, there are pretty many mouths to feed in the Caravan. And neither I nor any of the others are willing to starve so you can feed this freak."

He had known that trying to appeal to Brehen's empathy would be in vain, simply because he hadn't any. Hearing the complete disgust in the other's voice when he talked about his child surprise lying next to him, fighting for his life, took Guxart aback nonetheless. He smoothed the blanket over Cedric's stomach. The boy's breathing came still steadily, undisturbed by the insults of his mentor. Of his *former* mentor, obviously. Well, this left at least one problem less to solve.

"Rest assured, none of you will have to starve. I'll feed Cedric from my rations."

"You're pathetic. A fucking excuse for a leader. You can't make the right decision to save your fucking life. And one day, this will be the reason Dyn Marv will perish."

"You're welcome to leave, Brehen."

"You fucking well know that I can't!"

"Then shut your mouth and let me do my work here."

Brehen gave him another sneer, looking between Guxart and Cedric.

"You can't protect all your precious kittens forever."

In the blink of an eye, Guxart had jumped up, grabbed Brehen by his collar and put a knife to his neck. "I can and I will. Do not try me, Brehen. You could regret it."

With a feeling of deep satisfaction, Guxart noticed the flicker of worry in Brehen's eyes as he stumbled out of the waggon. Just then, Cedric stirred.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Another sunday, another chapter. While working on this fic I noticed that four chapters wouldn't be enough for the story I wanted to tell. So, there will be two more chapters. I hope you enjoy them!

Somewhere next to him, a pestle scraped against a mortar. The sound was disgusting; it brought goosebumps to his arms and neck. He wanted to stop the screeching noise, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get up. Everything hurt. His skin, his muscles, even his bones were sore. He felt even worse than after that one training accident. About a year ago, he hadn't been quick enough to cast Quen to shield Brehen's Aard and had been hurled across the whole training ground until he had crashed into a tree back-first.

He ignored the impulse to open his eyes. He wanted to see where he was, sure. But there seemed to be at least one other person with him, and until he couldn't say if this person was dangerous or not, pretending to still be asleep seemed to be the reasonable thing to do. Meanwhile, he had other senses he could use. The smell of herbs and alcohol filled his nose. That didn't help much in identifying where he was.

Cautiously, he tried to move his toes. It worked, although it sent a sharp pain through his left ankle. There seemed to be a splint around his left foot, too, and another one around his right forearm. He could still move his fingers, though, and his left arm seemed to be fine. Better than nothing.

He should try to turn his head next, but the constant dull throbbing behind his brow combined with a sharper, stabbing pain every now and then made him hesitate. The pain and the scratching sensation of a bandage he felt on his forehead led him to the conclusion that he must have hit his head somewhere. He couldn't remember where or why, though.

This was bad. A good witcher never lost track of what happened. A lesson Brehen had taught him. He remembered Brehen. He was his mentor. He tried to remember other things, too. His name was Cedric, he was twelve years old and a witcher in training. Today, they had practised walking on a tightrope in Fano. There had been a storm raging and the rain had poured down so heavily little rivulets had flown through the streets of the city.

He still couldn't say where he was or why he was here. He could have been captured by bandits for all he knew, although there was nobody who would pay a ransom for him. Sucking on his lip, he suppressed a frustrated groan.

The smell of herbs grew even stronger when the screeching of the pestle finally stopped. The next thing he heard was the light sound of footsteps on wood. He had to find a way out of

here, no matter how hard this would be with a wounded ankle and wrist. Before he could plan his escape, though, he had to know *where* he was. Just a little look wouldn't kill him, would it? If he was correct and there was only one person with him in this room, he could defeat them. Or surprise them and flee.

He regretted the decision instantly. Swallowing, he closed his eyes again. The person he had heard stood with her back to him. Farid'eh, one of the strictest and most annoying witchers in Dyn Marv. She was the healer of their school, so he had to be in the sickbay. This would explain the smell and the bandages. It didn't make any sense, though. He had been in Fano, over an hour's march away from the Caravan. Why-

"Cedric?"

Farid'eh sounded bossy as usual, but there was something else in her voice. Concern? She pressed one of her hands against his brow. She was gentle, which was strange, too. He couldn't think about it, because the bandage around his head itched under her touch, so he turned his head. It was just a little movement, but she noticed it nonetheless. A beginner's mistake, and one Brehen would have punished harshly. He wasn't here, but dealing with Farid'eh wasn't any better.

"Can you open your eyes?"

What a stupid question. She was lucky he was too exhausted to come up with a snarky remark. He only opened his eyes because she wouldn't stop pestering him until he obeyed. That was just the way this woman ticked. He gave her the most defiant look he could muster, staring into her eyes without blinking.

"Welcome back. How do you feel?"

Although there was no malice in her voice, she eyed him, like a predator would its prey. She probably enjoyed asking all these silly questions, well knowing he had to endure it because they were in her territory. He wanted to pass out again. His pain, Farid'eh – everything would just be gone.

Since wishes were rarely granted, he could do nothing but nod, regretting it instantly, because it made the throbbing in his temple much worse.

She narrowed her eyes and he almost expected her to bitch about his rudeness or something like that, but she surprised him by touching the sides of his arms.

"Can you feel this?"

His nod was weaker than the one before, but it seemed enough, because she continued with her examination. She touched along his legs, asked him to bend and extend his feet and his hands as far as possible given his splints. He had to watch her finger moving in different directions without moving his head and poke his tongue at her. She even tested his light reflex by casting a small Igni and making him look into the flame. For a moment he was worried she would set his eyebrows on fire if not the whole waggon, but she had probably done this countless times before, so nothing happened apart from his face warming up.

It felt like an eternity until she was done with her tests, and by the end of it, he was incredibly tired. She seemed satisfied, though. Her expression was more relaxed; she even gave him a small nod.

“You’re doing fine. We’re almost done now.”

He blinked in surprise. That was more praise than he had ever gotten from Brehen, and it came from Farid’eh, from all people. It had to be some brainwashing technique to make people get better as soon as possible. Well, if it helped, he wouldn’t complain.

“There’s just a few easy questions left. Do you remember what happened?”

Of course. How could he have thought Farid’eh could be nice? Of course she would mock him as soon as she could. A few easy questions – for her maybe, because she surely knew what had happened. She always seemed to know everything at any given time. That was just another annoying thing about her. The thing was, nothing about this situation here was easy for *him*. He didn’t know what had happened. There had been rope training and... a dagger. At least he thought to remember a dagger. Not that it made any sense.

He huffed in frustration and shook his head, trying his best to ignore the fresh wave of pain behind his brow.

“Don’t worry,” she said with an expression in her eyes that told him he had every reason to be worried. “Do you remember me?”

He frowned. Was she kidding him?

“...F...F...Fa...wi’dae.”

He blinked again, trying to figure out what was wrong. His mouth and tongue didn’t obey him. Taking a deep breath, he tried to calm down. Farid’eh’s raised eyebrow did nothing to help. He turned his head and pointed at the table behind her.

“...Wa...wath..ur.”

He swallowed, trying to ignore his heart pounding in his chest. He just needed something to drink. His throat was as dry as the Korath desert, so of course he couldn’t speak properly. It would all get better once he wasn’t thirsty any more. When he sat up, his stomach turned into a pit of nausea.

Farid’eh filled a mug and gave it to him, never breaking eye contact. His hands trembled so much he spilled some water on the blanket. She didn’t bother to chide him. That had to be a bad sign, just as bad as his throat not feeling any different once he had emptied the mug.

“Look at me, Cedric.” Taking the mug away, she stared at him as if she wanted to see right through his eyes into his brain. “Do you have problems thinking of the words you want to say?”

He shook his head. Hastily. That brought another crashing pain to his head, but it didn’t matter. Brehen always said the other mentors would gladly use any reason to punish and

exclude his adepts. By the way Farid'eh looked she didn't want to shun him, she probably wanted to bring him into the woods at night and feed him to the wolves.

"...I..."

She shook her head. "You should sleep, Cedric. We'll see how you feel tomorrow."

His breath hitched in his throat as he shook his head again. No. No, no no! He had to get away from her now. Her words should sound comforting, but he looked right through it. She wanted him to feel safe and then she would put him down. Because that was what happened to broken adepts. No matter if they went mad after the Grasses or if they had horrible accidents...whenever they were considered too broken to fix, they were killed.

His vision began to swim. Ashamed, he realised that he had started to cry. He raised his healthy hand, and although it was shaking, he eventually managed to sign a sentence.

"I am not crazy."

It was the first time in he wished to have been paying more attention to his sign language lessons so he could say something more convincing, but Brehen always said there were more important things to learn. So he could only hope this one sentence was enough to convince Farid'eh.

"Sleep."

He tried to get up and run away, but got tangled in the blanket, struggling like a beetle trapped on its back. He could do nothing when Farid'eh cast Somne and everything went dark again.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

While Cedric tries to recover, the Elders of Dyn Marv have a very interesting talk - I hope you enjoy the new chapter!

“How is he?” Dragonfly blurted out as soon as Farid’eh entered the waggon, not even waiting for her to sit down. It was rude, sure, but they hadn’t met for a tea party and the question was reasonable, so Guxart didn’t tell her off.

Farid’eh, graceful as ever, took her time until she had sat down, on the chair next to him, as usual. Taking a sip from the wine-filled tankard he had offered her, she eyed Dragonfly, then Ferenc, then the empty chair next to him. The chair was Jad’s, but Guxart hadn’t told him to come, well knowing he would be of no use in this case.

The brief glance he gave Farid’eh told as much, and she nodded briefly. When she had taken another sip and put down the tankard, she finally answered.

“He will pull through.”

The look she gave Guxart prompted Dragonfly’s next question.

“But?”

“He broke an ankle and a wrist. A clean fracture each. He will be able to start training again in about a week.”

“That sounds promising,” Guxart said.

“It is. There is nothing to worry about his bones. I am not so sure about his head, though.”

Filling his pipe, Ferenc didn’t even look up when he asked the logical follow-up question. “Did he lose his mind?”

Guxart held his breath, ignored the blacksmith and looked at Farid’eh, hoping against better judgment she would put his worries to rest.

“As far as I can tell, no. He suffered a concussion and can’t remember what happened.”

He let out a sigh of relief.

“Mhm.” Dragonfly fiddled with the mug in her hands before she filled it again. “Seems he got off lightly. Funny how Brehen’s kittens always have more luck than brains.”

“Hardly. The concussion has seemed to affect the centre of speech in his brain.”

“Why? Does he suddenly know how to say “please” and “thank you”?”

“Enough!”

He put his mug down with more force than necessary, causing Dragonfly to raise her hands appeasingly. It should be a soothing gesture, but it made him only angrier. She was right of course, Cedric wasn’t a polite adept. He wasn’t even a particularly nice one, but could they blame him for it? He was one of Brehen’s trainees, one of his child surprises, so had he ever had a chance to develop differently?

“It’s hard to tell between the stuttering and slurring.”

The cutting sarcasm of Farid’eh’s comment tore him from his thoughts. It managed to finally shut up Dragonfly, too. Even Ferenc looked up from his pipe, knitting his brows.

“Will these...impediments last?”

“I am a healer, Guxart, not a fortune teller. Maybe they will, maybe they won’t. By experience, they won’t go away completely. And I would be delighted if all of you wouldn’t look at me like that. I did what I could for him. If you want more, you should hire a sorceress.”

Dragonfly rolled her eyes. “Calm down. Everybody in the Caravan knows you’re the best healer around. It’s just...,” she shrugged, “annoying as the little brat is, I pity him.”

“Do you now? You know, just moments ago, it sounded very different.”

“Moments ago I didn’t know about his condition. Now I do and I pity him.”

“Pity won’t help him.”

“*I know, Farid’eh!*”

Guxart swallowed. “Stop it. We have enough problems without us arguing. Brehen won’t take him back.”

Ferenc, drawing a deep breath out of his pipe, leant back in his chair, tapping his fingers on the table. “Did you talk to him?”

He nodded.

“Can you just ditch your child of surprise?”

“Brehen can.”

“But Cedric’s been one of his favourites.”

“Until he disappointed him.”

“By falling off a rope in the middle of a storm. A disgrace, really,” Dragonfly muttered.

Farid’eh sighed. “When did Brehen talk to you?”

“Yesterday.”

“His opinion will hardly change with the news of Cedric’s condition.”

“No.” He let out a humourless snort. “That is why I wanted to talk to you. Cedric needs a new mentor.”

Farid’eh looked at him as if he had proposed to raid the Nilfgaardian treasure room wearing clown costumes, Dragonfly shook her head and Ferenc drew another breath from his pipe, his face vanishing in the smoke.

“Listen. I know this won’t be easy, but—”

Surprisingly, Ferenc was the first to interrupt him. “I am out, Gux. This boy had been in Brehen’s care for the last six years – that’s half his life! He’s a hopeless case. You won’t get Brehen’s nurture out of him, no matter how hard you try.”

Dragonfly nodded. “He was always one of the first to laugh about adepts that were weaker than him. And I won’t risk the trust of my two kittens to take someone like him in.”

He closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. He had known it would go like this. And yet, against better judgement, he had hoped that any of the others, of his *friends*, would do the right thing and help Cedric. They were talking about a child, after all. A child that would be lost without a mentor.

“I respect your decision, although I had hoped for a different outcome. In this case, I will mentor him.”

“Guxart, you already have too many kittens to take care of. And as I said, your other trainees won’t think any better of you if you mentor Cedric.”

“And what am I supposed to do, Dragonfly? Let a twelve-year-old take care of himself? A twelve-year-old that obviously can’t even speak for himself anymore?”

Ferenc tilted his head. “What about Jad or Lexandre? Cedric’s mentoring would stay in the family, so to say.”

“Brehen’s decisions apply to his best friends as well. Neither Lexandre nor Jad will risk his ire to mentor Cedric. Besides, he is better off alone than with Lexandre who would only take responsibility if you threatened to kill him.”

Dragonfly sighed, untied her braid and curled one of its strands around her index finger. Her clenched jaw and narrowed eyes screamed that she would rather be anywhere else than here. She had always hated long and tedious debates, and as glad Guxart was that she still had agreed to come tonight, her bad mood jarred on his nerves.

Suddenly, a coy smile came to her face. “Farid’eh, why don’t you become his new mentor? You already healed his wounds, it would only be logical.”

Farid’eh blinked, then looked at Dragonfly as if she had gone mad. “I am the healer of Dyn Marv.”

“Guxart’s the Grandmaster, and he’s still mentoring.”

“Dragonfly, it’s enough!” Guxart narrowed his eyes. Everybody knew Farid’eh didn’t mentor any more since her last kitten, a girl that had been barely five years old, had died of smallpox while Farid’eh could only hold her and watch helplessly how all her remedies failed. That had been several decades ago, but he knew that she still hurt, and he wouldn’t allow anyone to poke in this particular sore spot.

“I do not need somebody to speak for me, Guxart. I will not mentor him, and this is my last word. I want all of you to respect this decision without having to explain myself. There are many others you could ask. Manon, for example. Or Old Tom.” Farid’eh got up and went to the door, only turning around to give Dragonfly one last glare. “I will not talk to you anymore until you haven’t apologized.” Then she left, slamming the door behind her.

Guxart clenched his fists. “Dragonfly, what was that?! Things are bad enough as they are, we need to stick together, for fuck’s sake!”

“I know! But she isn’t better than anybody else here. And it isn’t fair that you have to do all the things the others don’t want to do. You’re our Grandmaster! You could just tell her to mentor him.”

“I could tell you just the same. We won’t discuss her decision, is this understood? Just like we don’t discuss yours. And you will go and apologize.”

“Fine,” she hissed. “I guess the meeting is over?”

As soon as he nodded, she left the waggon, smashing the door behind her as well.

With a sigh, Ferenc stood up too, coming over to him and giving him a small pat on the shoulder, all the while spreading his pipe smoke in the waggon. “Seems like you’ll need a new door soon.”

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

And here is the final chapter. There is a bit of a cliffhanger - I plan on writing little one-shots about Cedric's further training, but I have no definitive schedule for it yet. Thank you all for following this story. It means the world to me!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When he woke again, the pain was still there. That was good. It meant that Farid'eh hadn't killed him. The bad thing was, if the pain was real, everything else must be, too.

But maybe he was lucky and his voice wasn't broken anymore. He cleared his throat.

“Ssssee...drigg.”

Wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong.

“...Bw...Bwee...en.”

Maybe...maybe shorter words would work. Start with one syllable and build on that.

He took a deep breath. “...N..nnn...nnnno.”

His following scream echoed through the waggon. Then the shame set in. He hoped nobody had heard him, especially not Farid'eh. She could still kill him and dissect him like a monster corpse. If she didn't, she would at least sneer at his state, just like anybody else. There was no place for weakness in the caravan. That meant he *had to* overcome whatever had happened to his tongue.

Speaking was easy. Everybody could do it, even the most stupid people. Now that he thought about it, the most stupid people often spoke the most. Babies were able to learn it, and it was something he had been perfectly good at a few days ago. He would re-learn it.

“Da...gger. Mmmuu...rd..er. Rohhp.”

He didn't remember hitting his wrist against his bunk, but the pain and the sound of the splint breaking brought him back to reality. Tears were streaming down his face, too. He couldn't help it, no matter how shameful it felt.

Crying like a fucking toddler! He should be glad Brehen couldn't see him; he always punished weakness. He brushed his healthy hand over his cheeks, focused on stopping to sob and tried to think of a solution. He was a witcher, for fuck's sake!

He had survived whatever had happened back in town, so he would surely survive this. His wounds were already healing and the pain had gotten better, too. Whatever had happened to his speech was just another kind of wound that would heal. If he was lucky, rather sooner than later.

Except it didn't.

No matter how hard and often he tried to form syllables and words, he stuttered and slurred the words as if he was some kind of retarded drunk. Whenever Farid'eh came to him, she asked him a question or two. Easy ones he could answer with one word, two tops. Every time he fought his way through his answer. She never gave a comment, never remarked that she heard any progress, never told him that it would get better over time.

Every time she came, he hated her a little bit more. When the door opened, he hoped it would be one of his friends visiting him. Secretly, he hoped Brehen would come, even if only briefly, just to ask when he could start training again. Sure, he was a busy man and he had six other adepts to take care of on top of his other tasks, but he had claimed Cedric by the Law of Surprise. And this had to be worth something.

But neither his friends nor his mentor visited him. With nothing to do but try to learn how to speak again, staring at the ceiling and hating himself, the days seemed to last forever. The nights were only worse. When he finally fell asleep, he always had the same nightmare. A storm, a rope, a false step and then he fell into a bottomless pit. He tried to scream, to call for help, but no words came out of his mouth. Brehen stood next to the pit and Cedric tried to reach for his hand, but his mentor always took a step backwards and stared into his eyes as he fell. He always woke then, drenched in sweat, his cheeks wet with his own tears.

With every passing day, he felt worse.

On the sunrise of the seventh day, on time as a Dwarven clockwork, Farid'eh entered the waggon.

“Good morning, Cedric. How do you feel?”

He had stopped reacting two days before. He wouldn't give her the satisfaction of seeing him making no progress at all.

“You know, it isn't my fault you're here. So you can stop blaming me.”

Snorting, he focused on his ankle as she lifted his blanket up and examined his foot. She didn't say anything, but her slight nod seemed to be a good sign. Then, she untied the bandage from his hand and removed the splint. She had exchanged the broken one without saying anything. When she carefully bent and extended his hand, it didn't hurt anymore.

“Your bones have healed nicely,” she said, already untying the bandage around his head, looking at the wound and cleaning it. Another small nod, then she turned around, got tweezers and a little knife and cut the stitches on his temple.

“That's it. You can leave now.”

His eyes got wide with disbelief. He couldn't leave! He was still sick! His voice was as bad as the day he had woken up. How could she expect him to just get up and leave? He shook his head.

"You made a full recovery. It's time to resume your training."

With trembling fingers, he pointed at his throat, still shaking his head.

Farid'eh sighed. "There's nothing I can do for your voice. We have to see if it gets better. Meanwhile, you can and should train and do your chores."

That had to be a joke. What kind of healer was she? Hadn't she sworn an oath or something? Even if it had just been some fucked up Cat school type of oath, it was her duty to help her people, no matter if she liked them or not.

He opened his mouth and shut it again when he felt fear rising in his throat and tears already burning behind his eyes. Biting his lip, he got off the bunk and walked over to his clothes that lay neatly folded on a chair in the corner of the waggon. He wouldn't cry in front of her and he wouldn't beg. He was Brehen's adept. He was proud and strong and he didn't need her. Or anybody else.

It took him some time to get dressed because his fingers still trembled and he felt a little dizzy, but eventually, he turned around, walked past her with his head held high and left the waggon.

The biting cold that greeted him was a nice distraction from the anger and disappointment burning hot in his chest. Taking a deep breath and brushing his hair from his brow, he went towards the training area. Most of the adepts didn't even look up when they saw him. Rhys gave him a small nod and one of the girls from a younger cohort smiled shyly. He ignored them and went over to Jad, who oversaw the sparring for today.

"Well, look who we have here. I wonder how many lives your little adventure has cost you."

For a moment, Cedric thought about trying to speak, but feeling the eyes of twenty adepts on his back, he signed his answer. Maybe he should ask Old Tom to give him some additional sign language lessons because he really just remembered the basics.

"I want to train."

Jad snorted. "Did you lose your voice? Sign language is only useful for contracts, you know that. Talk to me, boy."

He swallowed, trying to fight another wave of fear, knowing there was no way out of this. Jad was as merciless as Brehen. And if he wanted to prove that he was still one of the best, he had to satisfy him.

"...I...I...I w-want to...to..."

The giggles somewhere behind him weren't as humiliating as Jad's smile and his honeyed voice as he answered, so loud that everyone could hear.

"It's alright, Cedric. No need to disgrace yourself even more. Take a sword and go over to the dummies. If you fight like you talk even the little ones would beat you within seconds. And we don't want to risk another injury, do we now?"

Biting his lip helped to keep the tears away. It didn't help with ignoring the laughter of the others or Jad's disapproving glance.

It didn't get any better after this. Sure, he still had his own bedroll (the second to the right corner of their waggon opposite the door), but that was all that had stayed the same. His former friends mostly ignored him, because they didn't want to listen to him stuttering through a three-word sentence and they definitely didn't want to use sign language. He was angry at them. *So, so, so angry.* He was still one of them! They were Brehen's kittens, they were special and they should stick together, for fuck's sake.

"You would have been the same," Dragonfly had told him after one of their alchemy lessons when his former friends stormed out of the place after the lesson was over, leaving him behind to clean up. He had kicked a jar filled with suet, staring at her and running after the others, trying to forget her words.

When he lay down on his bedroll that night, he still mulled over her words. He hated her guts, but she was right. He would have done the same. Because in Brehen's circles, there was no space for failure. The thing was, he wasn't a failure. He had just had a bit of bad luck. And if he found a way for Brehen to just listen to him, just for one minute, he would surely understand. After all, it had been him who had sent Cedric on that rope.

For the next week, he didn't get his chance. He didn't even get to talk to Jad or Lexandre instead. Jad turned away whenever Cedric tried to approach him, and Lexandre just laughed whenever he came near. Even Rhys seemed annoyed by him by now.

On his seventh day out of the sickbay, however, when most of the Caravan sat around a campfire, huddled in cloaks, furs and blankets against the cold and he was sore and tired from a day of training and lessons, cooking duty and a most frustrating hour of improving his speech all by himself, Brehen came up to him, holding a tome in his hand.

"Cedric, I have an offer for you."

The sudden attention after a week of ignorance almost made him flinch. He looked at his mentor with wide eyes, trying not to blink.

"Not that you deserve it, because your failure on the rope brought disgrace to the whole school—"

"Leave the boy alone, Brehen!" Guxart, always the one to protect the weak. Cedric fumed. Couldn't that fool see that he only made things worse?

Brehen twitched his lips in disgust before he went on.

"But you and I are still bound to each other by the Law of Surprise. Therefore I decided to give you a second chance. And I advise you to use it wisely because this is nothing I would

usually do.”

Dragonfly, sitting across from Cedric, rolled her eyes and mimicked Brehen, making the adepts next to her giggle silently.

Cedric didn’t know how she could laugh about Brehen. All he could do was nod. Eagerly. He would do everything to get back into Brehen’s grace, to prove himself worthy. He would have cut off his own hand if his mentor demanded it.

“Very well,” Brehen said, smiling his dangerous smile, that showed no kindness, only teeth and danger. He threw the book at him. Cedric fetched it with trembling fingers.

Transmutations and Metamorphoses, the cover read. He swallowed. What should he do with this book? If Brehen wanted him to conjure something, he was lost. He was a witcher, not a sorcerer. And Brehen knew that he wasn’t even that good witch casting witcher signs.

Brehen let a few moments pass, enjoying Cedric’s insecurity, his smile growing wider. It had become deadly silent in the Caravan. Everybody watched the both of them, waiting for what would happen next.

“You will find that the task I will give you is an easy one. Read the first chapter aloud, without a mistake, and I will take you back.”

A murmur went around, but Cedric hardly heard it. He hardly heard Guxart’s tirade, too, but saw from the corner of his eyes that Manon and Dragonfly held him back by his shoulders. It didn’t matter. He blinked, trying to swallow the disappointment and pain away. For a moment, a tiny moment, he had thought that he would get another chance, but this...this was cruel. Brehen knew Cedric would fail. Even many of the other adepts couldn’t read a whole chapter without making a mistake, and they didn’t have a speech disorder.

He looked between the book and Brehen. His mentor watched him, attentively, waiting for any reaction, his eyes full of glee and spite. Cedric looked back at the book, his fingers shaking harder, and opened the first page.

“To follow the example of the sorcerer from the tower, we first need to classify substances, dividing them into superior and inferior varieties. Only the former can be described by the theory of interdependence presented here.

Inferior substances do not produce a chain of quasi-life structures, for their nature is substandard in quality and they cannot exist independently. However, it has been proven that they are paradoxically essential for the chain to exist in spite of their inferiority. The hypothesis of interdependence assumes that the chain of quasi-life must contain one substance of each superior element. Nonetheless, the chain’s structure, proposed by Raffard the White, has one too few paces for them, namely only five. If the chain were transposed and then transmuted, the problem would easily be solved. Alas, the first operation cannot be performed without damage to the chain’s integrity. The only solution is to use a so-called reversed transmutation, which will eventually cause the chain to rotate.”

He closed his eyes, biting his tongue to stop himself from screaming.
It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t fair!

He wasn't stupid and he knew how to read. His father was a merchant, and Cedric had been able to read his first words even before he had come to Dyn Marv. Brehen knew this because he had claimed him. It wasn't Cedric's fault his tongue didn't work right at the moment. That didn't mean anything. He wasn't worth less than any of the other adepts, he -

"Come on, now, boy. I don't have all night!"

He could feel all eyes on him, and finally, Guxart stepped up and came towards them.

"Take your book and leave Cedric alone! This is cruel, Brehen, and I won't allow things like that in Dyn Marv!"

Brehen simply laughed. "The world is cruel, *Grandmaster*. Get over it. And this little brat here," he pointed at Cedric, "is nothing but a useless waste of resources."

A few adepts giggled, others gasped. Cedric didn't care.

A useless waste of resources.

The next thing he noticed, blurred by the hurt that spread in his body like poison, was Farid'eh stepping forward and slapping Brehen square in the face.

"You fucking bitch!"

"I just gave you what you deserve. What you don't deserve is to take care of any kittens. So at least Cedric here will get a new mentor."

"And who," Brehen nearly spat the words out, "would be willing to take in a broken thing like him?"

"The person who can tell the difference between broken and damaged. Me."

Chapter End Notes

The excerpt is from the book "Transmutations and Metamorphoses by Adalbertus Aloysius Kalkstein" which can be found in-game of the Witcher 1.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!